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ABSTRACT

The special circumstances liberal arts graduates confront in finding employment and the implications for personnel recruiters, college placement officers, and liberal arts colleges are considered. It is suggested that corporate recruiters are missing some valuable prospects by failing to recognize certain qualities of liberal arts graduates (e.g., bilingual competence) that may not be as prevalent in vocational graduates. Studies showing the success of these graduates over time, their achievement motivation, and job satisfaction compared with other graduates are cited. It is suggested that placement officers need to educate recruiters about the advantages of the liberal arts background and to inform liberal arts students and faculty about job opportunities that are not always considered. Liberal arts colleges can use alumni beneficially as information sources and can broaden employment opportunities by developing flexible curricular patterns. Examples of how this is done at the Pennsylvania State University are included. (SW)

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The Liberal Arts Graduate in the Job Market: Spring of Hope or Winter of Despair

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Stanley F. Paulson

The Liberal Arts graduate facing the job market this spring may feel much as Charles Dickens described an earlier time when he wrote:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--

Not only will an 1980 graduate feel that way at times, he will find commentators and advisers to confirm his moods. My view is that the times facing him are neither the best nor the worst, and he should lose himself neither in the spring of hope or the winter of despair. It suggests a cartoon in the New Yorker showing two little old ladies in a stands at a baseball game where a player is yelling at the umpire about his decision, and the umpire is shouting back. The one lady is saying to the other "I suppose the truth lies somewhere in between." To deal with the circumstances that confront him, I should like to focus my comments on what the Liberal Arts graduate needs from the recruiter, what he needs from the placement officer, and what he needs from his college.

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One of the widely recognized problems he faces, for example, is the growing tendency of recruiters to ask to see only graduates with technical and vocational degrees. This is happening, interestingly enough, even though fields such as Business, for example, are increasingly involved with almost all aspects of social problems and social groups.

It is a mistake for business and industry to recruit only for narrow specializations. To deal with social issues and social pressure groups on matters of labor relations, ethnic and racial interests, pollution, taxation, plant siting, and urban politics, there is a need for people educated in social sciences, the humanities, and the sciences. This is not to say there isn't a need for engineers, accountants, and other business specialists, but along with them business and industry need talented employees with strong backgrounds in social and public policy. John C. Sawhill, a distinguished leader with experience in Wall Street, in government as the Federal Energy Administrator, and in education as President of New York University, stated it this way:

> The only way to assure that the wisest and most farsighted policies are made by managers and supervisors at every level is to rely on the best people. The "best," in most cases, however, does not mean the ever-larger annual legions of narrowly trained accountants, tax lawyers, school administrators, dentists and welfare workers currently being disgorged by our institutions of higher learning. It means those most deeply and thoughtfully educated in the humanist tradition. A thin patina of liberal arts slapped on the Managerial Man or Woman is not enough. Culture is not a condiment with which to perk up

lawyers and bureaucrats at cocktail parties. It is not an embellishment but an absolute necessity if we as a society are to get our priorities right.

This is not to say, of course, that any liberal arts graduate can make that contribution. But the best educated and accomplished among them will bring to an organization a depth of humanistic understanding and awareness of public needs that the graduate who is more narrowly trained cannot achieve.

Such graduates, based upon our studies, do very well in competition with more narrowly trained specialists. At Penn State we followed a sample of liberal arts graduates from 1955, 1960, 1965, to see how they did in competition with other specialists in the field. We found, of course, that they started at lower salaries than those trained in such occupations as computer programming, sales, marketing, and administration. Over a period of time ranging from three to fourteen years, however, they out-distanced the field in every one of those occupations in salaries, and presumably in value to their organizations. This is quite typical of the liberal arts graduate who may have problems at the job entry level, but whose broad education enables him to be of wider value and thus earn more advancement as the years go by. Assuming that recruiters want to hire graduates who over a period of years will develop into leaders, it is a bad investment to choose only specialists. General Motors, for example, is one of the corporations that has recognized this, and has developed a working relationship with a group of liberal arts colleges to bring selected graduates into the corporation for training as production supervisors.

The fact is the liberal arts graduate has special skills just as the engineer or the accountant, skills that are just as valuable to the organization and its development. Interpersonal and communications skills are highly developed in talented liberal arts graduates, and they are of particular importance in large organizations. National surveys of business and industry as to personal qualifications needed for management possibilities invariably includes skill in interpersonal relations and facility in personal communication.

The excellent study by Nancy Ochsner and Louis Solmon, published by the College Placement Council, of a large sample of 1961 and 1970 graduates confirms this. They found graduates in the workplace from a large number of academic and professional fields considered that other than courses in Business, the most important preparation should be in English and "interpersonal and communications skills."

A different kind of competence for special positions is in bilingual skills. Graduates with advanced work in a foreign language, for example, have bilingual skills important to public and private organizations in international communication and world trade. A program at Penn State to provide introductory business preparation added to a strong French major has resulted in the placement of these French and Business graduates in banks, manufacturing corporations, travel agencies, and federal government agencies which have operations in France, French Canada, French-American trade or diplomacy. Some months ago, Pan American Airways announced that they had 400 openings for employees who were fluent in a second language, a special kind of skill that selected liberal arts graduates possess.

There is evidence, also, that liberal arts graduates often acquire analytical skills that are somewhat different from those in other vocational specializations. A recent study by psychologists Winter, Stewart, and McClelland, of a sample of students in three institutions in liberal arts and other vocational fields is pertinent. Matching the students for intelligence and social class, they tested them at college entry and at graduation. The liberal arts graduates, they found, superior in conceptual analysis, evaluation of reasoning, and leadership motivation. This pattern of motivation which McClelland of Harvard has studied includes a strong concern for power combined with high self control. In a series of experiments he has found this motivation is "usually found in individuals who are considered effective leaders--managers who have a talent for creating in their subordinants such qualities as high morale, a sense of responsibility, organizational clarity, and team spirit."

I mention this because some employers may assume that the student who majors in a vocational field is likely to be higher in motivation and aspiration than those choosing liberal arts disciplines in the humanities or social sciences. As one frustrated employer put it, "Too many men quit looking for work as soon as they get the job." There is evidence, however, that demonstrates that liberal arts graduates who choose to go into such positions not only tend to have positive motivation but also achieve satisfaction in their work.

Of the liberal arts graduates who had been in their jobs some nine years, for example, Ochsner and Solmon found that from 62 to 80 percent of the liberal arts graduates in different disciplines indicated that they were "very satisfied," a percentage which was significantly higher

than the 46 percent of the engineers who indicated similar satisfaction with their jobs. This is understandable since the liberal arts graduate is not trained for a specific job, and does not have highly fixed expectation for what it should be. From the point of view of the organization, this has advantages because they can socialize the individual to the needs and opportunities of the company. From the point of view of the recruiter, then, the liberal arts graduate can have special advantages.

Let me turn now to the placement officer in the college or university and his role in regard to the liberal arts job seeker. I know our liberal arts graduates make problems for you, in part because there are many more of them than there are recruiters asking to see them, in part because these graduates are not always sure what they're looking for, and in part because they can't always explain in an interview what they can do. If these are problems, as I know they are, they are problems in the nature of our higher education system itself, and placement officers must be educators in dealing with it. You must not serve as compatibility dating offices to match prospects with a preference of the recruiters. Recruiters need education about the possibilities I have just been discussing, and liberal arts students and faculty need education on how to secure the right job.

One of the reasons that placement officers must be educators is because of the changing job market for our college graduates, which is not reflected in the recruiters' requests. We have to educate students to job opportunities where college graduates have not typically gone in the past. The U.S. Department of Labor has indicated, for example, that in the period from 1969 to

1978 one out of four college graduates took jobs which had not traditionally been filled by people with a college degree. It predicts that one in four college graduates in the coming years up to 1985 will take such jobs, thus requiring all of us to look at new areas of availability and opportunity.

This requires that cooperation between the college and the placement office be greatly enlarged. I know this is going on at a number of institutions, and I believe it must be expanded for the mutual benefit of students, faculty, and the institution. Other colleges probably do as we do, for example, and sponsor a career day in which the placement staff, faculty, students, and alumni meet in workshops and individual counseling on job opportunities. Last month we had some 55 alumni in 16 different occupational categories in business, industry, state and federal government, mainly from states on the East Coast meeting with 35 faculty and over 700 students to discuss career opportunities. The alumni enjoy coming back to the University, particularly to do something more substantial than just to drink at a football game. The faculty who participate are subtly educated into the career needs of students with whom they deal in their departments, and the placement staff is able to deal with many more people than they would ordinarily reach.

We have also found that students enjoy participation and training programs with the placement staff so that they in turn can work with other students in the college in their own college center which has a small library of books, pamphlets, and references on job opportunities.

If changes are required in the role of recruiters and placement officers, they are also required in the role of liberal arts colleges.

A Minnesota study completed a few years ago showed that 75 percent of their graduates were well satisfied with their education and their job opportunities which were predominantly in professional, technical, and management occupations. Only 28.4 percent said they were satisfied with their career preparation in college. Many institutions I know have followed the recommendations of the College Placement Council of some years ago in establishing, for example, courses in personal and career decision making. Our course has been extremely popular with some 200 students or so every term. In fact, it's been so successful that the psychologist who set it up and wrote a textbook for it has now gone into business as a consultant, making a new decision in his own career.

What we have not done adequately, however, is to relate the world of work to liberal education. Initial efforts in this direction have been very successful. As I indicated earlier, the French major with a small core of courses in business has opened a great many opportunities for those students. Graduates of this program are with business firms in France, in Quebec, in international banking and manufacturing firms, and a number of them are working with the National Security Agency in Washington. We are also experimenting with a French and M.B.A. program with internships with the University of Nice Business School. More such possibilities will open as colleges of business administration extend their preparation of students for international trade. New course areas, such as ethics in business, medical ethics, industrial history, which we have underway, we hope will broaden students who specialize in professional fields, as well as broaden the relationship of humanities to the world of work for students in the liberal arts.

Is this prostituting the liberal arts? On the contrary, liberal education will be enriched. I believe with Ernest Boyer, the U. S. Commissioner of Education, that "work is univeral. It tells a great deal about people and cultures. For many of us, work is an expression of who we are and where we fit." "I work, therefore, I am" may be an overstatement of the case, but it touches a circumstance familiar to us all. Education, while its purpose must always go beyond work, does not and should not bypass the centrality of work, historically, culturally, and personally." As long as the liberal arts college concentrates on the humanistic foundations for living, the social development of personality and policy, the development of effective communication, and cultural foundations, it will continue to fulfill its unique role for the betterment of society. While the individual student must continue to be the focus of our concern, all of us, the recruiters, the placement officers, and the colleges must be prepared to change. Otherwise we cannot meet the mutual needs of our students and our society.